

**An Introduction to the Psalms:  
The Two Pillars at the Gate  
Psalm 1—“God Rewards the Righteous”**

--CEFC 1/2/22

---

In the fourth century, the great bishop/theologian Athanasius  
wrote in a letter to a friend in which he praised the book of Psalms--  
“I think that in the words of this book all human life is covered,  
with all its states and thoughts,  
and that nothing further can be found in man.  
For no matter what you seek, whether it be repentance and confession,  
or help in trouble and temptation or under persecution,  
whether you have been set free from plots and snares  
or, on the contrary, are sad for any reason,  
or whether, seeing yourself progressing and your enemy cast down,  
you want to praise and thank and bless the Lord,  
each of these things the Divine Psalms show you how to do,  
and in every case the words you want are written down for you,  
and you can say them as your own.”<sup>1</sup>

It is no wonder, then,  
that when Augustine was dramatically converted to Christ in 386 AD,  
and he went into a spiritual retreat to reflect on his new-found faith,

---

<sup>1</sup> A summary, found in *Athanasius; The Life Of Antony And The Letter To Marcellinus*, translated by Robert C. Gregg (Paulist Press, New York, 1980), 101-129; p. 116,

he determined to immerse himself in the Psalms,  
for he knew that there he would encounter this God he had come to trust,  
and there he would find a language to use when speaking to him.

Christians through the ages have found this to be true.

The Psalms have been the church's prayer book.

John Calvin, commenting on the Psalms, wrote—

"What various and resplendent riches are contained in this treasury,  
it were difficult to find words to describe. . . .  
I have been wont to call this book not inappropriately,  
an anatomy of all parts of the soul;  
for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious  
that is not here represented as in a mirror."

Another writer has said,

"The Psalms appeal to the whole person;  
they demand a total response.

The Psalms inform our intellect,  
[they] arouse our emotions,  
[they] direct our wills  
and [they] stimulate our imaginations."<sup>2</sup> /

For the last couple of years, Susan and I have been seeking to read a psalm each day  
in our devotional time together—  
as a means of hearing from God

---

<sup>2</sup> Longman, *Psalms*, p. 13.

and a way of speaking to God.

And as we begin 2022,

I want to encourage you to dig into the Psalms

as a rich resource for your Christian life.

I want to do that by focusing our attention on the first two psalms

in these first two weeks of the new year./

You may not realize that the book of Psalms—or the Psalter, as it is called—

is actually comprised of five books.

As is clearly set out in our English translations,

the psalms are arranged into five sections.

Psalms 1-41,

42-72,

73-89

90-106, and 107-150.

Each book ends with a doxology—

**“Hallelujah! Praise be to the LORD forever!**

**Amen and Amen.”**

Ps. 150 serves as a final doxology for the whole collection.

The fact that there are five books may reflect the pattern

of the five books of the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses—the Torah.

The significance of this division of the psalms is much debated,

but mainly through the headings of the psalms,

with their references to particular historical events

and to particular people,  
we can detect a general pattern.

Books 1 and 2 focus especially on David and the establishment of his kingdom.

Books 3 and 4 reflect the troubles and questions Israel faced  
during the exile in Babylon.

And Book 5 looks forward to a time after the exile.

But this is just a very general picture,  
and lots of psalms don't seem to fit into this pattern at all.

But from early days, it has been observed that the first two psalms—  
Psalms 1 and 2 together and they stand apart,<sup>3</sup>  
They appear to provide a kind of introduction  
to the entire collection of psalms.

These two psalms set forth the basic premises upon which the whole psalter is built.  
You could say that the prayers of the Psalms  
are all based on the promises found in Psalms 1 and 2.  
In a sense, they act to prepare the worshipper to enter into the sanctuary of God—  
almost like the two pillars that stand at the entrance of the temple.<sup>4</sup>

So these first two Sundays of the new year,

---

<sup>3</sup> Neither has a superscription (in contrast to what follows). The blessed man of Psalm 1:1 is the messianic king of Psalm 2—(cf Dt 17—the ideal king of Israel is to live by the Torah). The wicked scoff at God and his Messiah and they are scoffed at by God. The righteous meditate (hgVh%o) on torah (hG%o...gVh%oy wñøtðrwøtVbá...w) while the wicked mediate/plot in vanity (qyáîr\_...w...gVh%oy). Both speak of “blessing (1:1; 2:12) and the “two ways”—1:6; 2:12

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 7:21

I want to expound these two psalms as a way into the great themes of the Psalter,  
as an encouragement to you to continue reading these rich spiritual poems  
inspired by the Spirit  
which are able to bring us into a deeper relationship with our God.

---

When we open the book of Psalms we enter into a world  
in which certain things are assumed to be true.

There are certain foundational convictions—  
the convictions that must be true or else the whole world falls apart.

Let's be clear—  
the truth is, everyone has certain foundational beliefs  
that can't be proven.

For the atheist materialist it is the assumption that all that exists  
is matter and energy and certain natural laws that govern their behavior.

So in the Psalms,  
There are certain foundational convictions.

Everything thing else we find in the Psalms hinges on these realities.

The first of these is found in the first psalm—  
it is simply this:

**God blesses the righteous,  
and condemns the wicked.**

In some ways, this is simply a statement about who God is

and the way in which he has ordered his creation.

The fact that God blesses the righteous

means that the Lord, the God of the Bible, is a moral God.

It means that good and evil matter to God.

In other words, we live in a moral universe,

and it is God who ultimately makes and enforces the standards

about what counts for good and what counts for evil.

In the Christian West, we often take this for granted.

We assume that God must be moral,

and we assume that God must require moral behavior

from those who would approach him,

but that wasn't assumed in the ancient world.

The pagan gods of the ancient near east

didn't require moral behavior in their worshippers at all.

All that mattered if you wanted to gain the favor of their gods

was simply offering the right sacrifices—

one's moral life had nothing to do with it.

And the gods of the Greeks were notorious for their petty jealousies

and many sexual escapades.

But Yahweh, the LORD, the God of Israel, was different—

He is holy, and he demanded holiness in his people.

As the prophets declared incessantly,

the Lord wanted nothing to do with their religious rituals

if the worshippers had no concern for justice and righteousness—

for protection of the weak and the powerless,

for honesty in their business dealings  
and for faithfulness in their marriages.

So the message of this first psalm is fundamental

to our understanding of the God of the Bible—

The God of the Bible is a moral God--

**He blesses the righteous,**

**and condemns the wicked.**

---

Think about it—

If God did not bless the righteous and condemn the wicked—

in other words, if there were no consequences for our moral choices—

then those choices would ultimately be without significance.

They wouldn't matter—

we could do as we please, and it would make no difference.

Without some distinction between good and evil,

and some judgment between them,

morality would become meaningless.

So this first of the psalms affirms this fundamental truth—

**God blesses the righteous,**

**and condemns the wicked.**

Turn with me to Psalm 1 in your Bibles

and let's look more closely at the way this theme is presented.

---

The psalm speaks of the one who is “blessed”—

some translate this word as “happy,” and it does mean that,

but our word “happy” is a little too trite to capture the sense here.

It speaks of one who finds joy and satisfaction in life

by virtue of being in the right with God.

So who is “blessed”?

The psalm begins with a negative contrast—

The one who is blessed is first described in what he doesn't do.

“**Blessed is the one**

**who does not walk in step with,**

**(or “take the counsel or advice of”) the wicked**

**or stand in the way that sinners take**

**or sit in the company of mockers,”**

Walking, standing, sitting—

I like how Derek Kidner puts it--

There seems to be a progression here—

an ascending level of engagement

resulting in a descending level of depravity,

involving the realms of thinking, behaving, and belonging.<sup>5</sup>

The psalmist offers three aspects and three degrees of departure from God,

portraying conformity to this sinful world at three different levels—

accepting its advice,

---

<sup>5</sup> So Kidner

being party to its ways,  
and adopting the most fatal of its attitudes—  
for the scoffers or mockers, if not the most scandalous of sinners,  
are the farthest from repentance (cf. Pr. 3:34).<sup>6</sup>

Many see a movement here that reflects our experience--

First, we accept advice from those we shouldn't;  
then we find ourselves going along with a dangerous crowd;  
and finally, we become hardened in our opposition to God's ways,  
holding the godly in contempt.

It begins with walking in the ways of “the wicked”—

that's a general term that can simply mean “the ungodly.”

The wicked are not necessarily notoriously lawless,  
but simply those unconcerned with the ways of God.

Theirs is the voice we can easily attend to and surround ourselves with  
in the ever present media we expose ourselves to.

They are those secular voices that can seem so reasonable and rational,  
but which have no foundation in the truth of God.

We can take it all in and begin to absorb it into our minds.

If that's all we fill our minds with  
then their assumptions  
their presuppositions  
and basic view of the world  
can become ours.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

We begin to walk in step with them before we know it,  
listening to their counsel.

Who has your ear?

Who do you listen to?

Whose voice gets your attention?

What media source do you daily attend to and absorb?

Those who are blessed by God **do not walk in step with the wicked**,  
they do not attend to their advice.  
They do not become captive to their view of the world.

---

But when we do take their counsel and heed their advice,  
we begin to act in ways that conform with their way of thinking—  
we stand in the way of sinners—  
we join with those who miss the mark,  
those who transgress the good ways of God.  
We find ourselves enmeshed in their way of living.

You see, our moral choices are not simply discreet, individual acts—  
they affect us for good or ill.  
Our individual choices impact our character—  
each act of will in defiance of God leaves its mark on our souls.  
Each act of moral rebellion  
makes the next one easier to make.  
We are changed—our hearts get harder,

our consciences are singed.

We find ourselves doing things we would never have imagined,  
when we **“stand in the way that sinners take.”**

---

And finally, we can join the ranks of the mockers—the scoffers, the cynics—  
with their snarky sarcasm and sneering derision  
aimed at anyone in a position of power or authority.

The cynic heaps disdain on the notion of anything being true or good or beautiful.

The mockers, the scoffers, the cynics—  
that character is epitomized in the voice of Satan in the book of Job—  
when he defiantly taunts God,  
**“Does Job fear God for nothing?”** (Job 1:9).  
**“stretch out your hand and strike everything he has,**  
**and he will surely curse you to your face”** (1:11).

To walk in step with the wicked,  
to stand in the way of sinners,  
to sit in the company of mockers--  
it is an ugly picture—  
and this is the antithesis of the life of the person blessed by God.

This is what the one who is blessed doesn't look like.

---

The positive picture is given in v. 2—

**“but the person who is blessed delights in the law of the Lord,  
and he meditates on his law day and night.”**

The person who is blessed—

the person who finds joy and satisfaction in life—

that person listens to a different voice—the voice of God.

He finds that the law of God—his torah—his instructions for living—

are not constricting and oppressive;

they are live-giving—

they are a source of great wisdom.

He delights in that instruction,

for he knows that it comes from our Creator

who knows how we are made,

and what we were made for.

Listen to the voice of the psalmist in Psalm 19—

**“The law of the LORD is perfect,**

**refreshing the soul.**

**The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,**

**making wise the simple.**

**The precepts of the LORD are right,**

**giving joy to the heart.**

**The commands of the LORD are radiant,**

**giving light to the eyes. . . .**

**The decrees of the LORD are firm,**

**and all of them are righteous.**

They are more precious than gold,  
    than much pure gold;  
they are sweeter than honey,  
    than honey from the honeycomb.

By them your servant is warned;  
    in keeping them there is great reward" (vv. 7-11).

God's law represents the manufacturer's instructions  
    for the proper operating of the human person.

Oh, the heartache that we can avoid by keeping to God's good ways—  
    we can head off broken marriages,  
    and substance addictions,  
    and even prison—by sticking to God's ways.

I have seen it as a pastor!

The law of God is good and true and beautiful  
    and worthy of our very careful attention—  
    The one who is blessed meditates on it—  
    reflecting on its practical wisdom for living a good life.

---

In v. 3 the psalmist paints a picture to convey this truth.

**"That [blessed] person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
    which yields its fruit in season  
    and whose leaf does not wither—  
    whatever they do prospers."**

Instead of being determined by the unpredictable occurrence of rainfall,  
this tree is planted by an irrigation canal  
that gives it a constant source of life-giving water.  
It's not dependent on outward circumstances—  
whether in the form of a downpour or a drought—  
it is healthy and strong regardless of what happens,  
and it naturally brings forth fruit.  
That's just what healthy fruit trees do.

That's what those blessed by God look like—  
whatever they do prospers.

---

**“Not so the wicked!”** we read in v. 4.

The picture quickly shifts from a fruit tree loaded with sweet fruits,  
to a farmer winnowing his grain.

In ancient farming, the grains of wheat are first crushed by the oxen on a hard floor,  
and then the farmer takes the winnowing fork  
and tosses the crushed grain into the air  
and lets the wind blow away the lighter outer husks—the chaff—  
as the heavier kernels fall back to the ground  
where they are gathered up and stored in the barn.

In the eyes of God the chaff is good for nothing; it is useless.

It has no substance—no value.

It is just blown away without a trace.

The lives of the wicked is like that—

Sure they may seem successful and significant in the eyes of the world,

but in God's eyes their lives are futile, a waste.

v. 5—**"Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous."**

Like the chaff,

they are rejected—cut off from the righteous. /

Verse 6 gives the fitting conclusion:

**"For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction."**

In the end, there are but two ways, two roads--

**"the Lord watches over"**—literally, he **"knows"**—"the way of the righteous"—

he sets his affection on them,

he cares about them.

He is their companion on the road to life.

Not so the wicked—

their road leads to a dead end—to destruction.

They will perish.

It is a truth that Jesus himself echoes—

“Enter through the narrow gate.  
For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction,  
and many enter through it.  
But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life,  
and only a few find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).

This is the choice with which every person is confronted.

---

There is something very fundamental about this psalm—  
which makes it a fitting introduction to the whole book.

It affirms the central truth about the character of God—  
he is a holy God, a moral God—  
he establishes the categories of good and evil  
and those categories are revealed in his law.

The Lord, the God of the Bible, is a moral God,  
and we live in a moral universe.  
Good and evil are central categories for the way we are to live.

Good and evil matter—and they matter ultimately because God knows, God sees,  
and he will bring everyone before his throne of judgment.

As I said, this is fundamental, it is foundational.

So much so that you may think it doesn't need to be stated at all.

But it does—

for it is widely denied in our day.

For many today, the standard for right and wrong, good and evil,

has nothing to do with the character of God.

His revealed will in the Bible—the law of God—

has no place in their thinking.

There is no God, and there is no judgment.

What is right or wrong is whatever I or the group I identify with thinks it is.

Often in our late-modern West,

the good is only defined as what promotes inclusion

and freedom from all constraints

and the release from all oppression by others--

which can result in the deconstruction of all moral norms,

for any norm, by its very nature,

excludes those who don't or won't conform.

That is a very dangerous situation for any society,

for, as one writer observed,

after they have dismissed every attempt to say, "This is good,"

all you are left with is "I want."

Objective standards of the good

give way to subjective preferences and personal desires.

The power to impose one's will on others is all that's left.

But there's nothing new about this way of thinking—

you find it in the Bible—

**Psa. 94:7—"[The wicked] say, "The LORD does not see;**

the God of Jacob takes no notice.”

or in Psa. 10:11--"[The wicked] says to himself, "God will never notice;  
he covers his face and never sees.”

The medieval Jewish expanded interpretation of the book of Genesis

puts these words in the mind of Cain,

who murdered his brother:

"There is no judgment, no judge, no reward to come;  
no reward will be given to the righteous,  
and no destruction for the wicked."

There have always been those who deny this fundamental biblical truth—

the truth that God is righteous,

he establishes what is righteous,

and he will bring all people to judgment.

And this theme is found throughout the Psalms.

The biblical view of the world depends on it.

---

But related to this truth about God and his righteousness

is a truth that relates to us--

God rewards the righteous.

There is great blessing in living in conformity with God's righteousness.

This is what defines the good life—living as God designed us to live,

living according to God's law.

We saw it in Ps. 19:11—"In keeping God's law there is great reward."

In the New Testament

this is captured in that wonderful chapter on faith in the book of Hebrews—

Heb. 11:6--"**without faith it is impossible to please God,**

**because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists**

**and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."**

"**[God] rewards those who earnestly seek him**"—

it's a fundamental element of our faith,

and if you long for a more robust faith,

I invite you to examine your commitment to this simple proposition—

Do you really believe that God rewards faithful obedience?

Do you really believe that God's ways are good—

that they are good for you?

A conviction of this truth is critical

because as the Psalms so clearly demonstrate,

life in this world will test this conviction severely.

For at times, the truth of Psalm 1 will be called into question.

We see this so realistically displayed in Psalm 10—

**"Why, LORD, do you stand far off?**

**Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?**

**In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak,**

**who are caught in the schemes he devises.**

He boasts about the cravings of his heart;  
    he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD.  
In his pride the wicked man does not seek him;  
    in all his thoughts there is no room for God.  
His ways are always prosperous;  
    your laws are rejected by him;  
    he sneers at all his enemies.  
He says to himself, "Nothing will ever shake me."  
    He swears, "No one will ever do me harm."

Yes, at times it does appear that the wicked prosper.

We see this again in Psalm 72—

73:3 "I envied the arrogant  
    when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.  
They have no struggles;  
    their bodies are healthy and strong.  
They are free from common human burdens;  
    they are not plagued by human ills.  
Therefore pride is their necklace;  
    they clothe themselves with violence.  
From their callous hearts comes iniquity ;  
    their evil imaginations have no limits.  
They scoff, and speak with malice;  
    with arrogance they threaten oppression.  
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
    and their tongues take possession of the earth. . . .

They say, "How would God know?

Does the Most High know anything?"

This is what the wicked are like—

always free of care, they go on amassing wealth."

Yes, at times this moral universe doesn't seem so moral.

the righteous suffer, while the wicked flourish.

The arc of history doesn't seem to bend toward justice.

You stand up for what is right, but you get punished for it.

When you see this,

when you experience this,

will you still hold on to the truth

that the Lord rewards those who earnestly seek him,

that he blesses the righteous?

This conviction is what will keep you from pursuing what is good

"by any means possible."

No, you will know that God's work must be done in God's way.

This is the challenge to our faith.

The truth of Psalm 1 will be challenged,

and holding on to it in the face of those challenges

is the ultimate test of our faith.

Wasn't it the challenge that Job had to face?

---

So how can we stand firm in our faith in the face of such challenges?

How can we avoid that path to destruction—

**“walking in the counsel of the wicked,  
standing in the way of sinners,  
and sitting in the company of mockers,”?**

It is through engaging our minds and hearts with the word of God—

we need his voice to overcome the voices of the world around us.

We need to trust that what Psalm 1 says about God and his ways are true.

As the Apostle Paul writes,

**“Do not conform to the pattern of this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.**

**Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—**

**his good, pleasing and perfect will.”**

We must find delight in the law of God—

we must see it for what it is—

the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God—

the God who is the Creator of the universe, the sovereign King,

who is also our loving Father in heaven.

We need to take it in—this good word of God.

We need to reflect on it,

and meditate on it.

and let it shape our view of God and the world.

And this theme will be explored throughout the Psalter,

with special attention in Psalm 19 and the majestic Psalm 119.

**“Blessed is the one who delights in the law of God,  
he meditates on it day and night.”**

---

And one final theme that emerges from this psalm.

This psalm speaks to us of the blessing of those who turn from the ways of the world  
and turn toward the ways of God—

delighting in the law of God,  
meditating on it day and night.

It speaks of a blessedness of living life God’s way,  
seeking to please him in all things.

But who of us can do that?

God rewards those who earnestly seek him,  
but do we always seek after God?  
Do we love him as we ought—  
with all our heart, soul, strength and mind?

We know we fall short,  
so how can this blessing be ours?

The psalms set forth the ideal of righteousness before God;  
they speak of a life of faithfulness and obedience and love—  
and in so doing they point forward  
to that one man who was truly blessed—fully and completely;  
they point to that one man

who loved God fully and followed him whole-heartedly.

That blessed man is Jesus Christ.

Jesus lived the life we are all called to live—

he shows us what a human life is designed to be.

His delight was in the law of God and he lived that law to the full,

for that law is summed up in the command to love,

and he did love—

to the uttermost, even the point of death on a cross.

Jesus is that blessed man,

and he gave himself for us so that we could share in that blessing.

He died for us because we were not blessed—we were under a curse—

but he bore that curse—my curse and yours—

when he hung on a cross.

It is as we are joined to Christ by faith

that we can experience the blessing that is described here—

we can be like a tree planted by streams of water,

which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither—

whatever we do prospers.

For if we are in Christ, the Lord will watch over us—

now and forever.

---

Jan. 2, 2022

## **An Introduction to the Psalter: Psalm 1—“God Rewards the Righteous”**

As we begin this new year, we look to the book of Psalms as a rich resource to deepen our relationship with God. This morning we expound the first of the two opening psalms that serve as a gateway to the whole book. The theme of this psalm is fundamental to the life of faith.

### **I. The Blessing of the Righteous (vv. 1-3)**

**A. Negatively—what to avoid (v. 1)**

**B. Positively—what to pursue (v. 2)**

**C. The Promise of Prosperity (v. 3)**

### **II. A Warning to the Wicked (vv. 4-5)**

**A. They become worthless (v. 4)**

**B. They will be rejected (v. 5)**

III. A Final Contrast (v. 6)—

Life and Death

*"without faith it is impossible to please God,  
because anyone who comes to him  
must believe that he exists  
and that he rewards those  
who earnestly seek him." (Heb. 11:6).*

---

Sermon Response:

## **An Introduction to the Psalter: Psalm 1—“God Rewards the Righteous”**

- What is this “blessing” that the psalmist speaks of here? What would it mean to experienced God’s blessing in your life? Why is it something you would desire? How does it compare to other desires in your life?
  
- Consider the various “steps toward depravity” found in v. 2—to listen to the counsel of the wicked, to stand in the way of sinners, and to sit in the seat of mockers? How have you seen them played out in the world? What would they look like in your life?
  
- How can you stir up a delight in the law of God in your heart? Take a few minutes meditating on the words of this psalm. What in particular sticks in your mind in what it says?
  
- Why is the image of the tree in v. 3 attractive to you? Why is this something you should desire?
  
- Reflect on the worthlessness of the wicked for a moment in the light of v. 4. How does that affect the way you view of Hollywood celebrities?
  
- Think about the “two ways” presented in v. 6. What road are you on? How does the gospel speak to the two ways of this verse?

